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City hears power update

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SCANABA - Thursday's storm had emergency officials busy - including Escanaba's electric superintendent, whose agenda item was moved up at council's meeting because of power problems in the city.

Electric Superintendent Mike Furmanski updated council members on three energy recommendations made last week by the Electric Advisory Committee (EAC). The item was originally fourth on council's agenda but was moved to the first item of business due to power outages in town.

Because the city's coal-fueled power plant is 50 years old, officials have been exploring various options to meet increasing power demands. The city has considered building a new plant, buying power wholesale, and using alternative energy sources.

During Thursday's meeting, the three council members in attendance - Patricia Baribeau, Tom Warstler and Mayor Leo Evans - agreed with the EAC's recommendation to not proceed with a study to convert the power plant to burn biomass.

The committee decided to not go ahead with biomass because of the cost of the study and the expense to convert the plant. Furmanski estimates it would cost about \$20 to \$30 million to convert the facility to burn biomass such as wood chips.

The EAC's second recommendation was for the city to seek competitive proposals from plant operators interested in operating the power plant.

Furmanski said in early June the current operator, the Upper Peninsula Power Co. (UPPCO), submitted a three-year termination notice to the city to negotiate a new contract within one year. UPPCO has been operating the plant for 50 years and wants to bring its contract up to date with the industry.

"It's time to see who else would be out there interested in operating the plant," Furmanski said. Council unanimously agreed to seek requests for proposals.

The third recommendation from the EAC was for council to determine if there is interest from the private sector to buy or lease the city's power plant. A private operator could be eligible for energy tax credits, Furmanski said.

Council tabled this recommendation because the three members in attendance agreed this issue should be a decision made by full council.

In addition to Gilbert Cheves and Brady Nelson being excused from the meeting, City Manager Jim O'Toole was on vacation. Public Safety Director Jim Hansen attended the council meeting in O'Toole's absence.

During public comment, Escanaba resident Pete Baker questioned why council did not reply to his committee application and why he was not appointed to the EAC as unanimously recommended by committee members last week.

Evans said no appointments were made Thursday because of the lack of council members in attendance. Evans said he was concerned because appointments need three votes and only three council members were at the meeting. He added he should have replied to Baker.

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